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ABSTRACT

The present language situation among Alaskan natives and the prospects for maintaining the traditional languages are such that in order to plan for a continued native language presence, it must be recognized that: (1) the shift to Engish is a natural result of a set of social conditions, with no single factor or group to blame; (2) the decline of the traditional language in active family and community use does not mean the end of native cultural and ethnic identity; (3) English is the dominant language for many Alaska natives; and (4) attempts to consciously maintain declining languages or to revive ones already moribund have been largely unsuccessful. Planned support for the native languages should consist primarily of activities that would "objectify" the languages in documentary and reference sources and in instructional materials, expertise, and school programs, allowing the languages to be consciously conserved as central artifacts of the cultures. The only viable institutional framework to sustain such an effort is state-supported public education. However, current programs in bilingual education are piecemeal, and motivated and funded to remedy the civil rights problem of limited English-speaking ability. A positive commitment to the teaching of native languages to all native children as part of a language enrichment program is needed, requiring a greatly expanded capability in teacher training, materials, curriculum, linguistic research, and teaching. (MSE)

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Bilingual Education and the Alaska Native Languages

Though the future is bleak for Alaska Native languages, it is not hopeless. However, it is important to understand what degree of maintenance or revival is realistic, given the widespread shift to English. For I believe that there is considerable confusion about what the present situation is, about what is being done in the "bilingual education" efforts, and about what is needed to ensure a continuing Native language heritage.

Language Shift

Unless there should be a sudden, radical change in Alaska's social and economic structure--and I don't expect one--the shift to English dominance and the decline in use and knowledge of the Native languages will continue inexorably. In 20 years the "first" language (by any realistic definition) of almost all Alaska Natives will be English. I don't make this prediction happily, for I value diversity in people and culture. On the other hand, I don't draw the grim conclusion that this means the end of Native ethnic and cultural identity.

The language loss which is occurring in Alaska is not a unique, isolated, unnatural phenomenon. As long as human language has existed, languages have died, either through destruction of their speakers or through the abandonment of one language in favor of another. Especially in the modern period, certain political, social, and economic forces have combined to cause rapid and widespread shift from dominant use of a local language to dominance in a regional, national, or colonial language.

Two factors which make the present world linguistic situation so volatile are the rapidly accelerating processes of Westernization and modernization, both closely linked. The first of these, Westernization, has meant significant cultural modification as a result of adopting Western institutions, goods, viewpoints, and methods. Among those which we find penetrating non-Western cultures are Western literacy, education, administration, medicine, religion, music, clothing, etc.--all maintaining strong affiliation with the linguistic milieu from which they originate.

The second of these processes, "modernization," has created profound change in both Western and non-Western societies. This is the shift from economies based on scattered populations produ-

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cing food and raw materials through hand or animal labor, primarily for subsistence, to concentrated populations producing or utilizing technological goods and services and depending for subsistence on complex systems of technologically based production and distribution. Accompanying this shift from the old ways of living to the new has been the shift from traditional, local languages (or dialects) to the "modern" language (or dialect) associated with urban life, technology, and bureaucracy.

I believe that frequently people who are trying to account for the linguistic situation in Alaska fail to understand the complexity and pervasiveness of these two processes of Westernization and modernization. Instead they single out one or two or a few "causes" of the language shift, such as the schools or parents not speaking Native to their children or radio and television. But I think that this model is based on medical diagnosis, inappropriately looking for some germ or virus to blame. I would suggest that it is more accurate and useful to view it from an environmental perspective. The ecosystem in which languages function in Alaska has changed--especially over the last 20 or 30 years has changed very rapidly. The lives of Alaska Natives are increasingly integrated in the modernized, Westernized world, both through penetration of that world into the Native areas and through mobility to participate in urban centered activities.

Two linguistic results are evident. The obvious one is that more and more Natives must spend more and more time in settings in which English is the well-established medium. These include such things as corporate affairs, higher education, dealings with governmental agencies, many kinds of employment, etc. The more puzzling result is that even in the Native villages and towns there has been a severe erosion of the settings in which the Native language is perceived as the appropriate medium. It is this central aspect of language shift which is so difficult for people involved to understand or for theorists to explain. Why can't the traditional language be maintained for family and community use? Why is a stable bilingualism not possible, one in which there is a division of linguistic labor, with English the means for connecting with the larger Anglo-dominated world and the Native language the medium for family, friends, community affairs, and ritual activities?

The answer, I believe, is that an unbalanced relationship develops between the indigenous language and the language of modernization. As Western social institutions such as education, Christianity, and social services intruded into village life they brought along new linguistic domains defined as English only. If it had been only this minimal Westernization--if the economic and social structure had remained relatively static--then I think a diglossic situation could have developed, one in which people would have become proficient enough in English to participate in the English context activities, but still would have maintained Native as the language of all other domains. And a sort of stable bilingualism could have been transmitted to succeeding

generations. But add to Westernization the recent, seemingly irresistible force of modernization, and there develops a marked asymmetry of status between the two languages. As wage employment becomes more and more necessary to attain and maintain the increasingly technologized life style, as success is more and more associated with participation in modern institutional activities, English is unconsciously perceived as the language with prestige and power. This perception holds not only for the new "outside" situations, but also carries over to traditional Native settings, resulting in the redefinition of these domains as ones in which English is at first an accepted alternative and eventually the expected in-group language. Though for a certain period of time bilingualism is necessary for participating both in the larger English society and in the full range of home and community events, it becomes gradually unnecessary as more and more people become bilingual. Given the disparity in status between the two languages, widespread bilingualism makes possible, perhaps even inevitable, the decline of Native.

In addition, the apparent appropriateness of English has been further reinforced by the prominence of material goods which come to the villages strongly associated with English. The snowmachines, boats, motors, appliances, generators, tools, utensils, clothing, etc. which are brought in are all advertised, described in catalogs, assembled and operated according to instructions, and repaired according to directions given in English. And in the case of radios, TVs, movies, tapes, and records, the things themselves provide additional channels for English to enter the familiar home and community settings, thereby displacing talk in Native and also conditioning people to accept and use English in such situations.

Thus I am saying that the language shift which has occurred and is occurring in Alaska is the normal, frequently seen, virtually inevitable outcome of a set of social conditions. It is not surprising that the Native languages are declining. Rather it would be most amazing if they <u>were</u> maintaining themselves strong and vigorous, given the way the sociolinguistic environment of Native people has been altered by the intrusion of Western culture and by the almost blindingly rapid changes in ways of living as a result of modernization. But almost nowhere do we see that sort of successful resistance under even remotely similar circumstances, neither with Native Americans nor with immigrants in the U.S. nor with other small or dispersed groups dominated by a more "advanced" society intolerant of cultural--including linguistic-- difference.

I am not implying that we must like what we see or that we shouldn't be angry about the circumstances which lead to it. However, I am strongly suggesting that for purposes of planning for the future of Alaska Native languages there is little to be gained from the two extremes of emotional reaction. On the one hand, it does little good, other than providing momentary emotional release, to blame the white man for "taking away the language." Though in a general, figurative sense "taking away"

might characterize the result of this complex social interaction, it is certainly not true in any sense at all that the white man can "give back" the language. On the other hand, it is equally futile for the people to blame themselves for "giving up" the language through laziness, lack of pride, or some other supposed defect. The reasons why people make the linguistic choices they do, whether among alternate forms within a language or between competing languages, are beyond direct, conscious control. Rather, they are determined by the social factors which people respond to unconsciously. Guilt will not alter the social circumstances that led to the decline nor will it bring the language back.

Language and Culture

Another obstacle to realistic planning for the future of Alaska Native languages is the strongly held assumption that preserving the Native language is essential to preserving a distinctly Native culture. I believe that this passionate identification of language and culture overstates the situation, implying clearly--and wrongly--that "the culture" is "lost" if the traditional language is no longer actively used, that it is impossible to maintain distinctive values, traditions, and ethnic identity with English as the community language. This mistake results from focusing excessively on "the language" and "the culture" as abstract, intellectual constructs which are fixed in form and which exist unto themselves. The tendency, then, is to overlook the people, losing sight of the fact that it is their actions which give the culture its existence, and that it is their needs which the culture serves, changing as it must to meet those changing needs.

I realize that this sort of relativistic perspective is hard to apply to the immediate situation. But in the historical perspective it is easier to view culture change with some objectivity and detachment. The new patterns usually turn out to be about as functionally adequate for the succeeding generations as the old ones were. Yet in the present, the changes seem invariably to be for the worse: corruption, decay, loss of traditions, skills, values, and life-ways, with nothing at all, or at least nothing of worth, as replacement. For example, I cannot see the changes of the last 25 years in rural Iowa where I grew up as anything but disaster for the people and for the land: the mechanization and chemicalization of agriculture, the depopulation of the farms, the decline of the village and small town economies, the flight of the young people to the cities, etc. Yet when I push the perspective back to my father's time and then to my grandfather's and consider the changes that took place then--ones which must have seemed equally revolutionary and wrenching--I must wonder if this particular moment is really the cataclysmic break, the point beyond which a culture is "lost."

As I had known it, yes. But the culture? I doubt it. I have to believe that for the span of time which I can conceivably speculate about--that is "plan"--there will be Iowa farmers doing recognizable agricultural activities and maintaining many of the ways and values that tie them to the past, and to me as well.

Now it may be true that in the comparable period of time the changes in Alaska Native cultures have been much greater, including a shift in language for many. But I cannot believe that in the foreseeable future--say a reasonable "planning" time of two or three generations--there will be a "loss" of Alaska Native cultures, of identity with groups sharing values and ways of living rooted in the past, but functioning still, and still recognizably Native. Therefore, I think that we must reverse the linguistic commonplace that a particular language is crucial to a culture, along with its corollary that when the language declines, the culture dies. In fact, the people continue, with a culture, including a language. All language planning must be for the people.

English as an Alaska Native Language

Though I believe that the Native languages can and should play an important role in maintaining Native cultural identity, the fact should be accepted, without useless guilt or bitterness, that the dominant language of Native life will be--as it is for many already--English. English is an Alaska Native Language. Therefore, the planning efforts should not focus simply on the traditional Native languages in isolation, but should encompass the full linguistic environment of Alaska Natives, including English.

One general goal should be to develop a greater understanding of Native varieties of English, including their features, uses, and relationship to other varieties. It is too widely accepted that "Village English" is merely degenerate language which is inadequate for communicating and therefore is not worthy of respect. We should learn enough so that we can demonstrate to both Native and Anglo Alaskans that the varieties of English used in rural Alaska are as legitimate as any other varieties. With such understanding and acceptance, the Native dialects can also perform the important social function of group identity, for dialect differences within a language can be an important manifestation of cultural separateness. Native Alaskans should feel affection for and pride in their varieties of English, sensing that they are integral to being "Native" today.

Another concern of language planning should be to foster the level of English proficiency necessary for Alaska Natives to succeed in education, employment, and public life. This task should not be left, by default, just to the traditional language arts establishment. People knowledgeable in the social, cultural, and linguistic aspects of language development and literacy

should be involved in designing curriculum and in training the English and language arts teachers. For one thing, the Native language instruction in the schools should be coordinated with and complement the English instruction. For another, if the English curriculum is failing to produce competent users of English, a backlash against Native language instruction may develop, either the old "it's interfering with their learning English" argument, or simply that it takes away too much time. Therefore I believe that it does nothing to enhance the prospects of the Native languages to hope that the English curriculum fails.

Language Maintenance and Language Revival

In planning language support efforts we are dealing with a situation in which something that functioned integrally in the culture without awareness of it and without conscious effort to maintain it comes to be noticed consciously and comes to be the object of concern. More and more the use of the thing must be willed. Therefore those who wish to maintain/revive Alaska Native languages by intervening with rescue efforts propose a most difficult task: to structure a situation so that people consciously learn and/or use a behavior which normally is unconsciously acquired and which is used without awareness of choice.

I think that such language planning should be based on realistic expectations. There is little evidence from elsewhere in the world to suggest that formalized intervention can save a language once it is obviously threatened. In the twentieth century such situations have developed in numerous areas, situations in which the language of power has driven down the language of a group, eventually leading to organized attempts to protect and encourage the endangered language. With the exception of the remarkable revival of Hebrew in Israel, none of these efforts, that I am aware of, has worked or is working. This is true even where the circumstances for maintenance/revival would seem to have been as favorable as possible. For example, the Republic of Ireland has large numbers of people, political independence, a widespread commitment to the language (including school and other institutional support), and a core of speakers still actively using Irish as their first and main language. Yet its decline continues, in spite of the importance that has been placed on maintaining it. Likewise in Wales (for Welsh), in Brittany (for Breton), in Finland (for Swedish), among many others, the organized attempts to protect and encourage the use of the subordinate language are not slowing noticeably the loss of full fluency and the shrinkage of domains. In the United States no immigrant group shows significant language retention over several generations, in spite of frequent community efforts to preserve that aspect of the homeland culture.

Thus there is little cause for optimism that Alaska Native

languages can be consciously revitalized or protected as fully functioning community languages. It almost seems that once a feature of culture, such as language, becomes the object of conscious concern, it is too late. The structures that are then devised and the actions taken cannot reestablish it as part of the unconscious background to daily life. We simply don't have a successful model of language saving that can be initiated from within or imposed from without.

What then should be done? Should efforts for the Native languages cease, since the results won't match the people's deepest desires for maintenance or revival? Or can the efforts be justified on lesser goals? I believe that there are two general goals which are obtainable and worthy.

The first applies no matter what the current viability. Each Alaska Native language should be "objectified" as fully as possible; that is, it should be given formalized manifestations in dictionaries, grammars, literature, and instructional materials so that the language can be consciously conserved as a central artifact of the cultural heritage. From each culture there should be people who are the tradition keepers. Among them should be those who maintain expert knowledge of the language, including some who are the academic linguists and some who are the trained language teachers. With such a base of documentation and expertise, the language can continue to have at least a conscious, symbolic presence in the life of the group. It can be studied as an academic subject; it can be incorporated, even if only minimally, in the passing on of cultural traditions and knowledge; and it can be used ceremonially.

The second general goal of language planning for Alaska applies to those groups which still use their Native language. Even if active use is declining and knowledge of it is receding up the age scale, concerted efforts should be made to retard these trends by consciously structuring and protecting domains for the language to function in. Because the loss of language by a group is not primarily loss of abilities by individuals who had them, but rather failure of children to acquire full receptive and productive control, the best way, by far, of countering the trend is to increase the situations in which children and young people will hear the Native language and be expected to understand and use it. The impetus for this must come from within the group and must operate through the motivation of individuals and through the exercise of acceptable social controls. For this the school, with its focus on individuals and conscious knowledge, is largely irrelevant, except that with staff and students speaking the language and with an accepting, encouraging atmosphere, the school could be another, very important setting in which the language could function naturally.

On the other hand, the goal of "objectifying" the Native languages does lend itself to formal, institutional planning. Given time and resources, we can make grammars and dictionaries,

collect texts, make teaching materials, train language teachers, develop language curricula, and, in theory at least, teach languages to those who want to learn them. These are essentially academic activities, ones requiring the framework of institutional education for successful design and long-term financing. This means that language planning for the Alaska Native languages is inextricably entangled with the problems and politics of public education in Alaska.

Bilingual Education

A high proportion of Alaska Native school children are enrolled in "bilingual bicultural education," an umbrella which has come to cover a wide variety of activities. I think that it is important to understand clearly the legal base on which these programs rest. Section 14.30.400 of the Alaska Statutes is the base for State mandated "bilingual bicultural education." Such service must be provided by schools "attended by at least eight pupils of limited English-speaking ability and whose primary language is other than English." No other possible criteria are stated in the law. It is absolutely silent on the goals of maintaining and reviving languages other than English. The targeted group is quite narrowly defined by two characteristics, both of which must be present: "limited English-speaking ability" and "primary language is other than English."

However, when we turn to the administrative regulations which the Department of Education issued to implement this law--and which have shaped bilingual bicultural education in Alaska--we find a very broad and diffuse interpretation of the concept. Chapter 34 of Title 4 of the Alaska Administrative Code sets out how districts must assess, classify, and serve children according to the degree to which they are of "limited English-speaking ability." The five categories which must be served are

A students who speak a language other than English exclusively;
B students who speak mostly a language other than English;
C students who speak a language other than English and English with equal ease;
D students who speak mostly English but also speak a language other than English;
E students who speak English exclusively but whose manner of speaking reflects the grammatical structure of another language.

(4 AAC 34.050)

"Appropriate programs" must be provided for all category A and B students and for those in C, D, and E who are underachieving by one standard deviation on a normed test or by one grade level according to the district's testing program (4 AAC 34.055(e)).

The regulations define six types of programs which are "appropriate":

> 1. bilingual/bicultural, which "makes use of a student's language other than English and cultural factors and maintains and develops the students skills in that language and culture. Additionally, it introduces, develops and maintains all necessary English skills. . . ."
>
> 2. transitional bilingual/bicultural, which "makes use of a student's language other than English and cultural factors in instruction only until the student is ready to participate effectively in the English language curriculum of the regular school program."
>
> 3. English as a second language.
>
> 4. high intensity language training, which "gives a student intensive instruction in English."
>
> 5. supplemental English skill and concept development, which "addresses the language interference needs of students."
>
> 6. language other than English as a second language, which "teaches the student's language."
>
> (4 AAC 34.065(e))

The options which are "appropriate" for the various student categories are specified in 4 AAC 34.065(a):

CATEGORY:	A & B (primary & intermed.)	A & B (second-ary)	C & D (all levels)	E (all levels)
PROGRAM				
bilingual/ bicultural	X	X	X	
transitional bilingual/ bicultural	X	X		
English as a second language			X	X
high intens-ity language training		X		
supplemental English skills and concept dev.			X	X
language other than English as a second lang.			X	X

My point is not to question the validity of the categories or the choice of programs, but to point out how little relevance the official State program of "bilingual education" has for the goal of supporting Alaska Native languages. It does not represent a firm Legislative commitment to teaching Native languages. Instead the program is conceived primarily as a vehicle for ensuring the civil rights of students who come from non-English language backgrounds, as a means of overcoming the "limited English-speaking ability" which hampers their participation in the regular school program. If bilingual education were based strictly on the Alaska law, serving only those "whose primary language is other than English," it would apply only to category A and B students and, thus, to very few Alaska Native children. However, federal law also applies, and the 1964 Civil Rights Act ban against discrimination on account of language has been interpreted and implemented much more broadly to include as well those who speak mainly or only English, but whose English is not the standard variety used in the school curriculum. When there is, or has been, another language in the child's family background, then the assumption is that this language has *interfered with the child's acquisition of standard English. If the child is not doing well in school, then this is taken as evidence that the school is not taking into account the language difference. Therefore it is discriminating on the basis of language, and it must take positive steps to help overcome the language barrier.

It was within this frame of reference under the threat of federal enforcement that the current Alaska regulations were developed and adopted in 1978. The result is a very broad mandate for the teaching of English language skills. Though the child's traditional language and culture are to be positively valued and reinforced, the intent is clearly not to maintain or develop bilingualism. Therefore, in spite of the name of the programs, in spite of the fact that some programs incorporate Native language instruction, and in spite of the widespread belief that current programs are going to save the Native languages, "bilingual bicultural education" as structured by current State law and regulations does not provide a satisfactory rationale or funding base for the teaching of Alaska Native languages in the schools. In is not and cannot be, given its civil rights purpose, the strong, full commitment to Native language programs comparable to the focused support given to other academic subjects in the curriculum.

What is needed is a commitment from the State to the teaching of Native languages comparable to the mandate and support given to the present English oriented "bilingual bicultural education." The remedial, compensatory, transitional focus of the present program should be broadened so that the teaching of the student's traditional language is encouraged or required. And of course the funding basis of this "language enrichment" component should not be tied to "limited English-speaking ability." Such a program, even if ideally implemented, would not "save" the Native languages as fully functioning community languages. However, it would help to perpetuate knowledge of Native language ability among children who will--and whose children will--identify themselves as members of a particular Native culture.

Summary

I have tried to place in realistic, unemotional perspective the present language situation among Alaska Natives and the future prospects for their traditional languages. I have suggested that those who are seriously concerned about planning for a continued Native language presence must clear away a number of self-defeating misconceptions and recognize

1. that the shift to English is a natural result of a set of social conditions, thus making it pointless to accept a heavy burden of guilt or to lay angry blame;

2. that the decline of the traditional language in active family and community use does not mean the end of Native cultural and ethnic identity;

3. that English is an Alaska Native language;

4. and that the history of attempts to consciously maintain declining languages or to revive ones already moribund gives almost no hope for success.

Limited thus by realism, planned support for the Native languages should consist primarily of activities which will "objectify" them in documentary and reference sources and in instructional materials, expertise, and school programs. These will allow the languages to be consciously conserved as central artifacts of the cultures. The only viable institutional framework within which such an effort can be sustained is, I believe, State supported public education. However, current programs in "bilingual bicultural" education are piecemeal and, most seriously, are motivated and funded to remedy the civil rights problem of "limited English-speaking ability." What is needed is a positive commitment to the teaching of Native languages to all Native children as part of a "language enrichment" program. Developing such an effort would require a greatly expanded capability in teacher training, materials/curriculum, and linguistic research and teaching.

Conclusion

Now that our oil revenues are declining, but our appetite for State funded construction projects seems only to increase, I do not know if we have the collective will to embark on such an ambitious project. An "infrastructure for the future" consisting of roads, bridges, harbors, buildings, etc. makes political and economic sense; a major commitment to the perpetuation of Alaska Native languages would create only more public sector jobs with no easily discerned product or service. Yet Alaska's future will be assured less by concrete and steel than by its people. Money invested now to help develop an "infrastructure" of the mind and spirit will yield returns long after the roads have crumbled and the buildings decayed. Helping Native Alaskans--the original Alaskans--sustain an important part of their cultural heritage and ethnic identity is a goal worthy of a land blessed with such a wealth of human and natural riches. We should do it because it is right.